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RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0085

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0795

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1969

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1917

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2254

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFAAA/DIA WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 0240

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 0162

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: EMBASSY HOSTS MADRASSA STUDENTS FOR IFTAR

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 28, Embassy Astana hosted a group of students from the Astana madrassa for an iftar. This was the first time that most of the students had met Americans or visited an American home. The evening went a long way towards educating future Kazakhstani imams about Islam in America and demonstrating respect for the Muslim faith. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) On September 28, the Embassy hosted 15 guests from Astana's central mosque "Astana Nur" for an iftar. It was the first official event attended by the Ambassador, who had arrived in Kazakhstan only two days before. Assistant Imam Adilkhon Serikbay later conveyed how proud he was that the Ambassador's first meeting had been with his students. The event took place at the residence of the Deputy Chief of Mission and was also attended by representatives of the Embassy's Public Affairs and Political-Economic Sections.

14. (SBU) "Astana Nur" has become a popular stop for U.S. government visitors, and the mosque's leadership has gone out of its way to make American guests feel welcome. Serikbay, one of three assistant imams, has been particularly helpful, and the mosque leadership specifically appointed him to work with us on this event. He selected one tutor and 13 of the best first- and second-year students from the neighboring 80-student madrassa to accompany him to the iftar. (NOTE: Kazakhstan's three government-sponsored madrassas are based in Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. The Shymkent madrassa accepts both male and female students; it is also rumored that a madrassa for girls is being constructed in Astana. Some of the students initially expressed apprehension about a madrassa for girls but ultimately conceded that this would be worthwhile if it would produce women who could raise good Muslim children. END NOTE.]

15. (SBU) The guests had already undertaken their main washing at the mosque prior to the iftar, but they requested to wash their hands shortly before sunset. Promptly at 6:59pm, they broke their fast with water and dates and then retired to the living room for a short prayer. Following the prayer, the guests joined American staff in the dining room for a dinner of Kazakhstani chicken noodle soup, boursaki (fried Kazakhstani bread), and beef stroganoff. For desert, there were cookies, nuts, and dried fruit.

16. (SBU) The students, who ranged in age from 17 to 21, were

primarily from northern Kazakhstan and most had left their towns and villages behind to study at the madrassa. Not only did they prefer to speak Kazakh, but some also could not even communicate simple phrases in Russian. None of them had previously traveled outside of their home country, and as a result they knew very little about the United States. One of the students, who was seated next to the Ambassador, admitted that this was the first time he had ever seen a "live" American. Another asked if the Bermuda Triangle existed or was a legend.

17. (SBU) The students were surprised to learn that there are more than 2 million Muslims in the United States, that American Muslims also read the Koran, and that America also has more than 2,000 mosques. They were particularly interested in learning about what it means to be a Muslim in America and were very surprised to discover that Americans are allowed freedom of conscience to convert from one religion to another.

18. (SBU) Though the students mainly study Islamic theology and the Koran, they also expressed a desire to study English and an interest in learning more about Islam in America. Embassy staff provided the students with copies of IIP's "Islam in America" and are exploring the possibility of bringing a poster show or speaker on Islam in America as well as opportunities to involve the madrassa students in sports or English-language activities.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Assistant Imam Serikbay said he was surprised and pleased to have been invited to an iftar by the U.S. Embassy and conveyed that no other embassy--including the embassies of Islamic countries--had ever reached out to the mosque with such an invitation. The Embassy last hosted an iftar (which the Astana Imam attended after receiving special permission from the Chief Mufti's

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office in Almaty) in 2004. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND